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The World's Most Connected Apparel Consumers: Profiling Online Social Consumers

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Keywords: Social consumers, social media, social network sites, segmentation

Background. Social media have given rise to the new consumer group, social consumers, who use social channels and networks to learn about products and make purchase decisions (Pivot Conference, 2012). Social consumers value the information provided by like-minded people who share common interests with them and desire a conversation with a brand in the social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and Twitter. In the apparel context, several market researchers report a particular consumer segment that is knowledgeable about fashion and also extremely active with SNSs (Netbase, 2013). These consumers consider SNSs as one of the most trustable information sources of their shopping and actively share their ideas about apparel products and brands on SNSs. While industry reports have constantly discussed this new market segment and contended that mainstream consumer behavior is changed in a fundamental way with new digital media, there seems no universal agreement among practitioners and academic researchers as to who are “social” consumers, what exactly should be included in the characteristics of this new consumer group, and how social consumers differ from traditional online consumers. The objectives of this study are to define social consumers with their distinct characteristics and to profile them on key variables that characterize social consumers.

Literature Review. Recognizing the lack of a clear definition of social consumers, the social consumer in this study is defined as *the consumer who uses online social networks to learn about products or services and shares the consumption experiences with others*. The most prominent characteristic of social consumers is that they consume information and learn about products through SNSs. In addition, social consumers are active in SNSs and expect firms to respond to listen, engage, and respond quickly through social channels. For the purpose of segmentation, four constructs were selected as the key variables that may characterize social consumers. First, social consumers may have stronger tendency of online social search, which is consumers' tendency to use SNSs to learn about products (“I often browse SNSs to learn about brands or products”). Second, social consumers may have greater navigational skill for SNSs (e.g., “I’m extremely skilled at using SNSs”). Lastly, social consumers may perceive greater benefits of SNSs managed by brands because they actively interact with brands via social channels. Perceived benefits of SNSs for brands are measured in this study as two well-established theoretical constructs: experiential and functional benefits. Experiential benefits of SNSs for brands include social interaction with a brand and other consumers and hedonic benefits derived from browsing and participating in SNSs (e.g., watching video clips uploaded by the company). Functional benefits of SNSs for brands include product/brand information offered by SNSs and monetary incentives offered by SNSs, such as coupons and promotional codes.

Method. As a representative platform of SNSs for brands, a brand page on Facebook was selected given its popularity. Respondents were asked to type the apparel brand that they had visited and participated in the brand page on Facebook during the past two weeks. The apparel

brand that respondents typed was automatically embedded in the questions about brands as well as a SNS for brands (e.g., “{#brand}’s page provides updates on upcoming sales”). All measures were adapted from previous literature and measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The sample was recruited from consumer panelists of a U.S. marketing research company. A total of 247 usable questionnaires were obtained. About 70% of respondents were female and more than three quarters of the respondents were white-Americans. The largest number (41.7%) of respondents was aged 31-40, followed by 18-30 (27.1%), 41-50 (19.9%), and 51-60 (8.5%).

Results & Discussion. This study used a two-step analysis by conducting a *K*-means procedure (non-hierarchical) with an initial seed generated from Ward-method (hierarchical), considering the disadvantages of a single use of each method (Block *et al.*, 1994). A cluster analysis generated three distinct consumer groups based on the four social consumer-characteristics. The three clusters showed significant differences in all four social consumer characteristics: online social search ($F = 4.63, p < .01$), social navigational skill ($F = 141.44, p < .001$), experiential benefits of a SNS for brands ($F = 18.06, p < .001$), and functional benefits of a SNS for brands ($F = 242.54, p < .001$).

Cluster 1, *Social Consumers*, representing 23.9% of the sample, scored higher than average on experiential benefits of SNS for apparel brands and the highest on the other three variables. Because this segment exhibited high scores on all four social consumer characteristics, it was labeled “social” consumers. Cluster 2, *Asocial Consumers*, accounting for 35.6%, were identified as having low levels in all four variables. Cluster 3, *Recreational Consumers*, representing 40.5% of the sample, scored the lowest on functional benefits of a SNS for apparel brands as well as online social search and lower than average on social navigational skill; but highest on experiential benefits of a SNS for apparel brands. As illustrated, this group may value the experiential aspects of apparel brands’ SNSs such as entertainment and social interaction but not the functional aspects. They may not utilize SNSs for such purpose as product information search and may not have a proper skill to do it either. To validate each segment, three clusters were compared based on other personal and demographic characteristics. The results shows that the cluster groups differ significantly in gender ($\chi^2 = 14.11, p < .005$), consumers’ attitude toward a SNS (i.e., Facebook) ($F = 17.70, p < .001$), and their online social connection tendency ($F = 35.36, p < .001$). This study provides insight into a new emerging consumer group, social consumers, by identifying a distinct consumer segment that clearly exhibits social consumer characteristics. Future research may further examine consumption behaviors of each group, such as what retail channels they prefer for apparel shopping, how they obtain and share product/brand information, and how each segment differs in terms of apparel-related variables (e.g., fashion innovativeness).

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